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BASKETRY DESIGNS OF THE MAIDU INDIANS OF CALIFORNIA¹

By ROLAND B. DIXON

The baskets from which the accompanying designs are taken were collected among the northern portion of the Maidu Indians of California, during the summer of 1899. The region has been of late years more or less thoroughly scoured for baskets by various local dealers, and by several traveling salesmen, who have become victims of the "basket craze." A considerable number of old baskets of very good workmanship were found, however, and new ones made for trade, and for the annual "burnings" held in memory of the dead, were numerous. The materials of which the baskets are made varies somewhat from place to place, and with the kind of basket. The large pack-baskets, conical in shape and with a capacity of a bushel or more, are generally made of the smaller twigs of the maple or willow, the roots of the yellow pine, and the stems and roots of the common brake (*Pteris aquilina*). The soup baskets and smaller saucer-like baskets are finer in texture and weave, and are made of maple, redbud, and a sort of grass or sedge known as *tsi'takim*. In the lower foot-hills and in Sacramento valley, willow is used a little more commonly than in the higher Sierra, and the twigs and wood of the "basket-wood" are used in place of or with the redbud. The patterns are either in red or black, the redbud and "basket-wood" being used for the former, and boiled pine-roots or brake for the latter. The soup baskets and tray-like baskets are of the variety known as "coiled"; the large pack-baskets, on the other hand, being "twined."

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In the series of forty baskets nearly two dozen different designs are used. For about twenty of these satisfactory explanations have been obtained up to the present, and these may be divided for convenience of treatment into three classes — animal designs, plant designs, and those representing objects such as arrowpoints, mountains, etc.

One of the simplest and clearest of the many designs belonging to the first group is that known as fish-teeth (figure 8). The execution of this pattern is rather irregular, and it is somewhat difficult to determine whether it was intended to have the cross-bars opposite each other or alternating. Looking at the basket from below, the resemblance to the wide open mouth of a fish is rather striking.

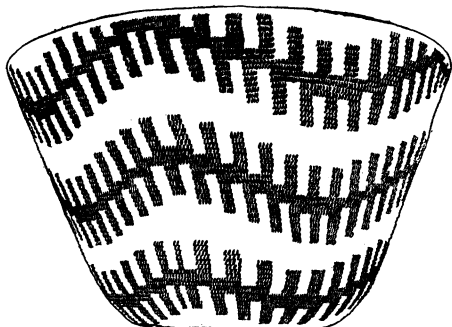


FIG. 8.—Fish-teeth (Cat. No. $\frac{59}{198}$).

A little less obvious in its meaning is the earthworm on a basket from the same locality as the last. In this (figure 9) the worm is represented by a succession of parallelograms, linked together by the corners, to form a sinuous chain running around the basket. The separate parallelograms here are said to stand for the segments of the earthworm's body.

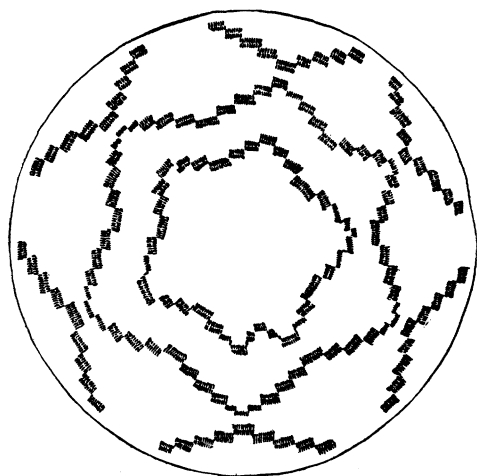


FIG. 9.—Earthworm (Cat. No. $\frac{60}{198}$).

Of very frequent occurrence on baskets from Sacramento valley and the foot-hills is

the design representing the quail (figure 10). In this the characteristic feature is the plume on the quail's head, shown here by the vertical square-tipped appendices to the parallelograms which are meant for the bodies of the birds. The quail-plumes themselves are used at times in the decoration of the feather-baskets, being woven in while the basket is being made, and standing out all over

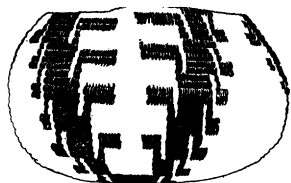


FIG. 10—Quail (Cat. No. $\frac{50}{188}$).

it when done. The use of the bird's plumes does not, however, seem to have been restricted to baskets which had the quail design.

Two other designs are representations of birds, the "geese flying" and the "duck's wing." One form of one of these designs

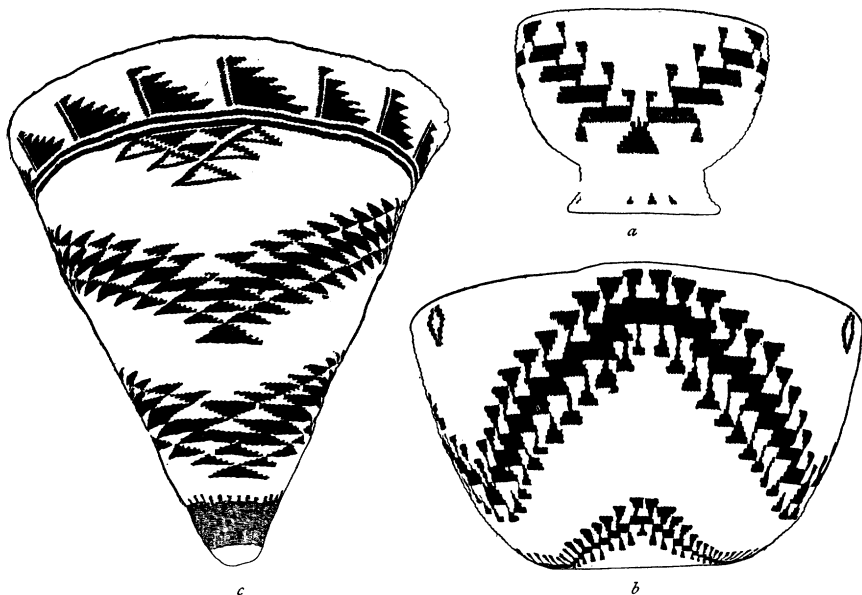


FIG. 11—Flying geese (Cat. Nos. $\frac{50}{83}$, $\frac{50}{178}$, $\frac{50}{557}$).

(figure 11c) is apparently meant for a flock of geese in flight, their triangular order being well shown in the arrangement of the points of the design. The other two forms (figure 11a, b), said also

to be "geese flying," are not quite so clear as the first. That numbered 11*b* is curiously like the quail pattern already described, except that the appendices are triangular instead of square; it is possible that these may refer to the feet of the goose seen just as the bird lights (?). The design known as the "duck's wing" (figure 12) is more or less doubtful in its meaning. It is said to signify the patch of white seen on each side of the bird.

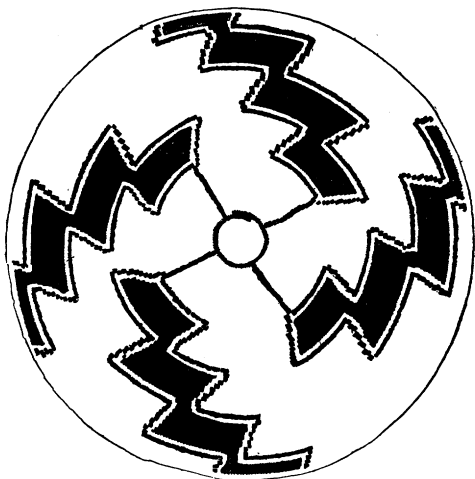


Fig. 12—Duck's wing (Cat. No. $\frac{50}{88}$).

Very clear in their meaning are the designs representing the "thousand-legged worm" and the racoon. The millipede or "thousand-legged worm" (figure 13) is shown by a broad band of solid color running in a zigzag around the basket and provided all along both edges with a great number of small triangles attached by short narrow lines, forming thus a sort of fringe. These are, as might be supposed,

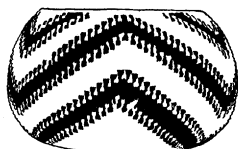


FIG. 13—Millipede (Cat. No. $\frac{50}{88}$).

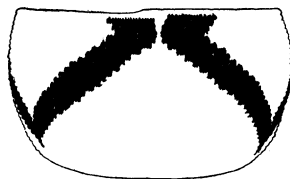


FIG. 14—Racoon (Cat. No. $\frac{50}{87}$).

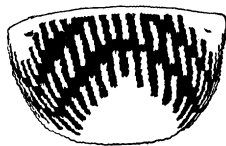


FIG. 15—Grasshopper leg (Cat. No. $\frac{50}{88}$).

the many feet of the millipede. The characteristic feature of the racoon design (figure 14) is in the peculiar curve of the band of color which runs around the basket. This is said variously to stand for the stripes on the animal, or for the *os penis*; in either case the intent of the pattern is clear.

Rather less realistic than the foregoing designs is the grasshopper pattern, found on a small basket from Genesee (figure 15). This might more properly be called the grasshopper-leg pattern,

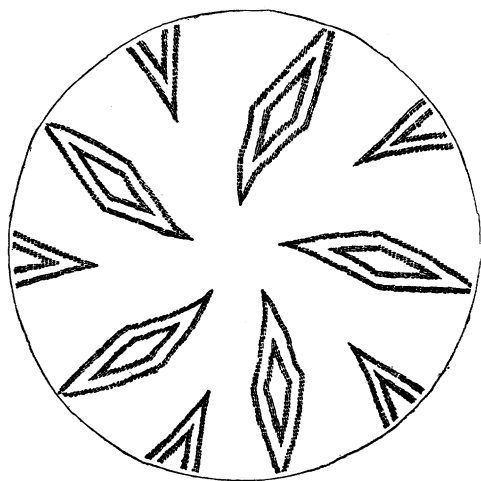


FIG. 16—Eye (Cat. No. $\frac{850}{248}$).

as this is the part of the insect which is represented. Apparently the longer bars are the legs, and the shorter bars at right angles to the former are the “feet” (?). Classed with the animal designs for convenience is the pattern known as the eye (figure 16). This is represented simply by a hollow rhombus or diamond.

Turning to the second group of designs, those representing plants, it is evident that here the number of different patterns is considerably less than in the first group. On a number of baskets is found a design of which the only explanation that could be obtained was that it was “just a flower.” This design (figure 17) consists of rows of broad-based triangles, each row from the base to the top containing successively larger triangles. In the specimen figured the design is not perfectly regular, but the pattern is sometimes made with great regularity,

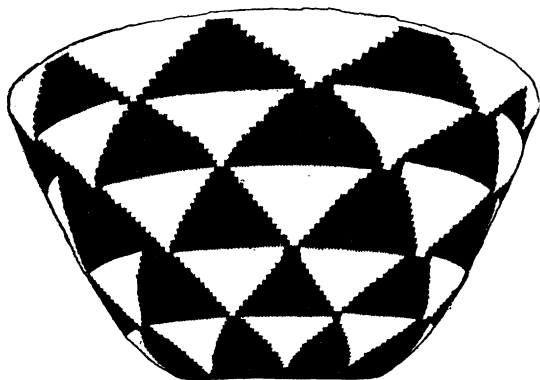


FIG. 17—Flower (Cat. No. $\frac{850}{181}$).

and the triangles arranged in a kind of whorl, giving a curious effect when the basket is seen from below. The triangles here represent the separate petals of the flower.

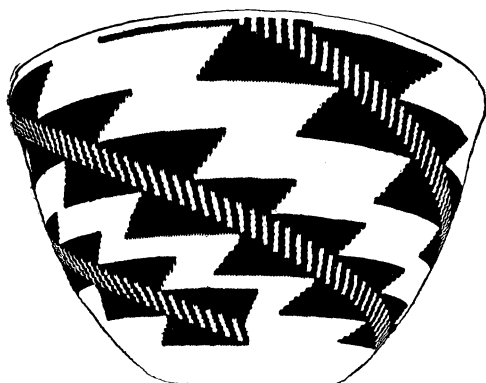


FIG. 18—Brake (Cat. No. $\frac{50}{885}$).

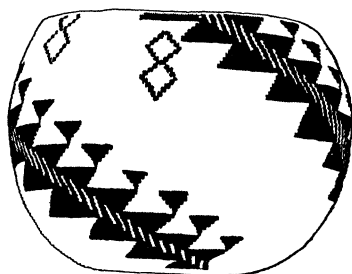


FIG. 19—(Cat. No. $\frac{50}{190}$).

The common brake (*Pteris aquilina*) is represented by the design shown in figure 18, from a basket from Mooretown. The

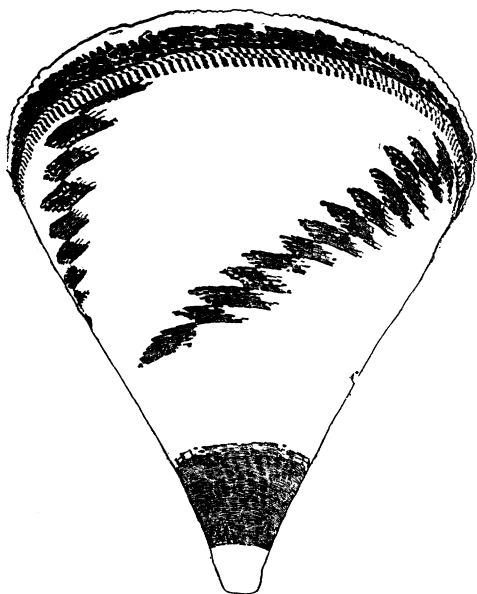


FIG. 20—Vine (Cat. No. $\frac{50}{830}$).

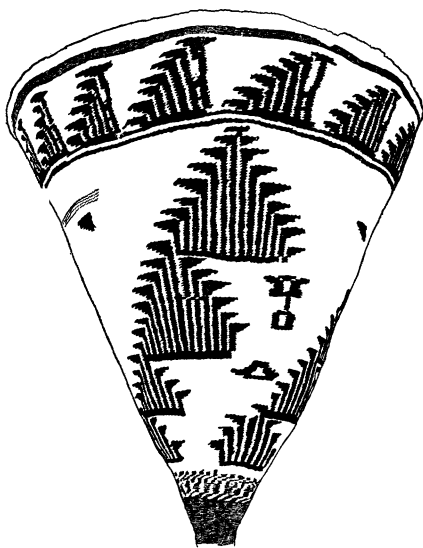


FIG. 21—Pine-cone (Cat. No. $\frac{50}{842}$).

points in this are intended for the pinnæ of the fern, but the meaning of the bars in the central stripe is not yet clear.

Closely resembling this pattern is one from the Konkau (figure 19), but of this I have not been able to obtain a reasonable explanation. Very similar also is the design said to depict the vine (figure 20). In this the spiral character of the pattern as it

winds around the basket is the twining of the vine about a pole, while the points are the separate leaves as they stand out on either side.

One of the most effective plant designs is that of the pine-cone, used by the people of the

higher Sierras. In this design (figure 21) the realism is quite marked, the broad, pyramidal form and the horizontally directed points being strikingly like the large and strong-spined cones of the digger and yellow pines. Although the digger pines grow in large numbers on the foot-hills, no specimens of this design were seen except in the higher portions of the mountains. What is apparently the same figure cut in two is represented around the upper edge of the large pack-basket on which the full design is shown.

Similar to the cone, but differing in that it has a solid center, is the pattern found on a basket from Big Meadows (figure 22). This is regarded as the representation of a bush, growing high up in the mountains, and apparently rather rare, as I was unable to get a specimen to identify the plant.

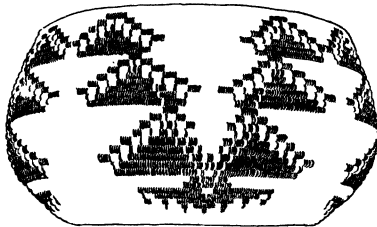


FIG. 22—A bush (Cat. No. 849).

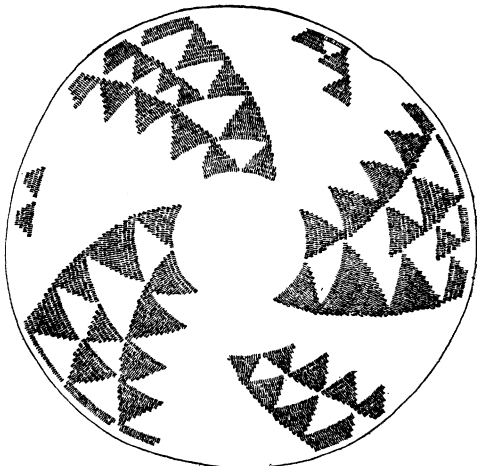


FIG. 23—Feathers (Cat. No. 100).

Of the designs representing objects belonging to the third group into which the different patterns were divided, that of the feather is by far the most important. It seems to occur in several different forms. The simplest of these, perhaps, is shown in figure 23. The characteristic feature of the design appears to be the notched or sawtooth edge, in imitation of an old custom of thus notching the arrowfeathers by burning. In figure 24 the design appears in a slightly different form, the notched

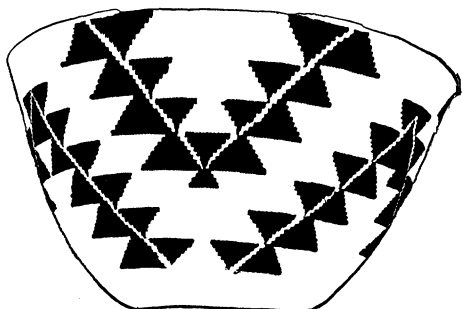


FIG. 24—Feathers (Cat. No. $\frac{60}{189}$).

“feathers” being arranged in points around the basket. A variation of this design is shown in figure 25, where the interior of the point is filled with a somewhat elaborate pattern, and again in figure 26 where this interior pattern is different in each point. There is reason to believe that these isolated triangles are meant to represent flint arrowpoints, a design which alone is very frequently



FIG. 25—Feathers (Cat. No. $\frac{50}{287}$).

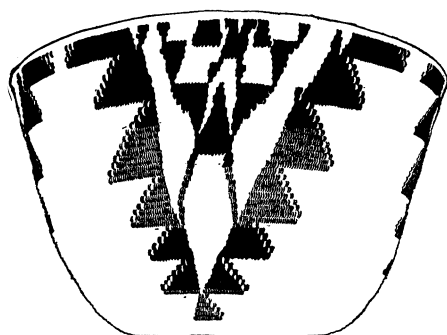


FIG. 26—Feather (Cat. No. $\frac{50}{283}$).

met. The association of the arrowpoint with the arrowfeather would not be an unnatural one, and till further evidence is forthcoming it may be considered that in the designs shown in figures 25 and 26 there is a combination of the feather pattern with the flint arrowpoint.

The flint arrowpoint design as it occurs alone is seen in figures 27 and 28. The triangles which make up this figure are linked together in a way different from those making the feather designs, and the longer axes of the triangles or rhombuses are vertical instead of horizontal.

The simple circular band of color surrounding the basket is

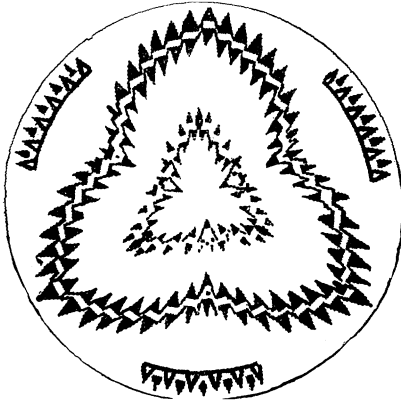


FIG. 27—Flint arrowpoints
(Cat. No. $\frac{50}{531}$).



FIG. 28—Flint arrowpoints
(Cat. No. $\frac{50}{547}$).

said to be a path or trail (figure 21). It does not seem to be of very frequent occurrence, and in all the specimens seen is a complete circle, without the gap so common on baskets and pottery from the Southwest, as also among some of the California tribes, of which the Yuki may be taken as an example.

A rather elaborate composite design representing mountains and clouds (figure 29) is shown on a basket from Big Meadows. Here the mountains are represented as a range in perspective, the short vertical lines being trees growing on the slopes. Above these mountains, and running all around the upper edge of the basket, is a zigzag line signifying clouds floating over the summits of the mountains.



FIG. 29—Mountains and clouds (Cat. No. $\frac{50}{580}$).

This completes the list of designs of which the meanings are certain or reasonably so. Taking each group by itself, it appears that the largest number of designs are representations of animals,

fully half of those here described belonging to that group. Plants and inorganic objects are shown in the designs in about equal numbers, both together about equaling the animal patterns. In frequency of representation, on the other hand, the feather design seems to preponderate; that is, this pattern will be found on a larger number of baskets than any other. Comparing the people of Sacramento valley and the lower foot-hills with those of the higher Sierra, there is possibly a little greater frequency of animal designs among the former. Certain patterns, such as the feather and the arrowpoint, are found among all the communities thus far visited, and seem to be of universal distribution at least among the northern members of the Maidu or Pujunan stock. Other designs, such as the pine-cone and the geese, are, so far as known, confined to the higher Sierra, while the fish-teeth and earthworm seem rather restricted to Sacramento valley and the foot-hills. Further investigation, however, will be necessary before the details of the distribution of the designs can definitely be stated. But even where the same design is found in several places, there seem to be local differences which are more or less constant.

In comparison with the designs on the baskets of neighboring tribes, a few words may be said: The geese and the feather designs have been recognized on baskets made by the Pitt River Indians. The latter come at times to Big Meadows and Susanville, and the Maidu at present often buy from them some of their baskets, which are much softer and more flexible than their own. In his paper on "Textile Art in Relation to Form and Ornament"¹ Holmes illustrates a basket (fig. 324) on which both the feather and the geese designs, or at least patterns closely comparable, appear. This basket is described as from the McCloud River Indians, belonging to the Wintun stock, which here, however, is in close contact with the Pitt River tribes. Quite comparable also to the feather design is that shown by Mason from baskets belonging to the Ute Indians of southern

¹ *Sixth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology*, fig. 324, p. 221.

Colorado.¹ No mention is made by either Holmes or Mason of the meaning of the designs which they figure, but the close similarity of the pattern from McCloud river to those of the Maidu and Pitt River Indians is at least striking. The simpler pattern on the Ute baskets, though strongly resembling the simple form of the Maidu feather design, is in all probability different in its origin and explanation. Designs quite similar to some of the Maidu patterns are also to be noted on baskets from the Hupa and other tribes in northern California, and among some of the coast tribes of Washington and Oregon.

As already stated, the twenty or more designs here shown do not by any means exhaust the list. With the considerable number which are not as yet satisfactorily explained, and those seen uncompleted on unfinished baskets, it is probable that the present list can be doubled; and it would not be surprising to find as many as fifty distinct designs used on their baskets by Indians of the Maidu stock. The knowledge of the designs is almost exclusively confined to the older women, the younger generation knowing only very few; therefore, unless the meaning of these many designs can be obtained before the death of the older generation, in this as well as in other tribes of the state, a valuable aid in the unraveling of the relationships between the many stocks of California will be lost.

¹ "Basket Work of the North American Aborigines," *Report of the U. S. National Museum*, 1884, pl. XXII, fig. 43; pl. XXV, fig. 48.